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- Lessons from the Field -

Free to Learn Miniseries: Navigating Conflict to Support Inclusion

Wednesday, January 17, 2024 | 3:00 – 4:30 PM ET
Transcript

Megan Gildin:

Good afternoon and welcome to today's webinar, Navigating Conflict to Support Inclusion. This is the third webinar in our Free to Learn miniseries. On behalf of the U.S. Department of Education, we are pleased to have you with us. In fact, over a thousand people registered for this webinar and we expect more to log on shortly. This webinar is part of our Lessons from the Field webinar series. This series highlights effective tools, techniques, and strategies employed by everyday practitioners to address topics that are on the top of educators' minds. You can access recorded webinars from the series on the webpage now being shared in the chat.

As always, as you participate, if you have additional strategies that are working for your community, please reach out to bestpracticesclearinghouse@ed.gov to share. Our work is stronger together and we all benefit from sharing effective strategies. Please note that the content of this presentation does not necessarily represent the policies or views of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does it imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education. My name is Megan Gildin. I am the deputy director of the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, or NCSSE, and will be the moderator for today's event. NCSSE is funded by the Office of Safe and Supportive Schools within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Please visit our website to learn more about NCSSE and to access a range of resources that address school climate and conditions for learning. To give you a sense of what the website looks like and the content it contains, here we share an image of our homepage on the right, along with some of our most popular products on the left. We also share the latest resources and events via social media, so please follow us there. Please note this webinar is being recorded. All materials that you'll see today including the slides, resources shared and the recorded version of this webinar will be available on the event webpage within

this website. Some items, including the slides and speaker bios, have already been posted. Please also note you can access previous Lessons from the Field sessions by visiting the webinar series webpage, which is also listed here and will be posted in the chat.

So after we finish up our logistics, Ruth Ryder from the U.S. Department of Education will welcome us and share more about the Free to Learn initiative. We'll then have a variety of opportunities to hear from students and practitioners about strategies they're using to support students in navigating conflicts and difficult topics, through our context setting presentation, our Relationships First practices demonstration, and the panel discussion. Then after a brief closing of the content delivery, we'll move into a Q&A with panelists. Please post your questions for speakers and panelists into the Q&A and Zoom.

It is now my pleasure to introduce Ruth Ryder, the deputy assistant Secretary in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education to welcome you to today's webinar. Ruth, I'll pass it to you.

Ruth Ryder:

Thank you so much, Megan. On behalf of the U.S. Department of Education, I'm pleased to welcome you to our latest Lessons from the Field webinar. This is the third session in our Free to Learn miniseries, Navigating Conflict to Support Inclusion.

Our nation has been contending with a disturbing series of hate-motivated attacks, as well as rising cases of anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia, following an eruption of the conflict in the Middle East in October of 2023. Since schools often reflect the health and challenges in our communities, the U.S. Department of Education is committed to supporting states, districts and schools in improving their ability to prevent hate-based threats and bullying, and recover from hate-based violence, and enhancing school's overall school safety and climate.

The Department of Education has two primary tasks in this work. One, support educational authorities and educational institutions to improve their ability to prevent hate-based threats and bullying and recover from hate-based violence. And two, enhance overall school safety and climate. In September of 2022, the United We Stand Summit, which is at unitedwestand.gov, was held at the White House to bring national attention to the need, to counter the destructive effects of hate-fueled violence on our democracy and public safety, to mobilize diverse sectors of society and communities across the country to respond to these dangers, and to put forward a shared inclusive bipartisan vision for a more united America.

In response to the 2022 White House Summit, United We Stand, the Department of Education launched the Free to Learn initiative last spring. The goal of this initiative is to galvanize states, districts, schools, public health agencies, and local communities to understand, implement, and sustain evidence-based practices and policies that support school safety, mental health,

and positive school climates, and to prevent bullying, violence and hate. So all students are free to learn.

A new section of the department's Best Practices Clearinghouse website, which is at bestpractices.gov, provides easy access to critical information, tools and resources related to Free to Learn, that can help build and improve state and local practices policies, and partnerships to support safe and healthy learning environments, that effectively prevent and address any forms of bullying, violence, and hate in our schools.

Organizations can also become pledge partners and engage in implementing resources and sharing examples of implementation successes and participating in topical webinars and communities of practice. As I mentioned before, today is the third webinar in our four-part Free to Learn miniseries. Each webinar offers evidence-based practices to prevent, address and ameliorate the effects of bullying, violence and hate, while also supporting school safety, school-based mental health and positive school climates. These practices are needed at the key moments in a student and family's school experience, as they enter the school or classroom, as they engage with learning and extracurricular activities, as they navigate circumstances that might result in differences of opinion or conflict, and utilize various supports and opportunities to enhance their school experiences and academic achievement.

In this webinar, we will first hear from Meaghan Wheat from the program on intergroup relations at the University of Michigan to explore the use of dialogue to help young people build relationships with others who are different from them, as well as build their capacity to challenge discrimination and create change.

Then Youth Relationships First coaches from the school district of Philadelphia will demonstrate sample practices that they are using in their schools to build connection and empathy. Our panelists will then discuss the practices and strategies they are using to help students navigate conflict and discuss difficult topics in ways that further build relationships, understanding and trust. Providing students and staff with tools and structures to navigate conflict effectively can support a positive and inclusive school climate where all students are free to learn.

Following today's webinar, we will have one additional free-to-learn webinar in February. That one is focused on providing ongoing support for students to reduce identity-based bullying and violence to promote student connection and well-being. We hope to see you all there. As we proceed with today's webinar, we know you will hear valuable information and strategies that you will be able to use in your schools and districts. Thank you for joining us today. Now, I will send this back to Megan to introduce our context setting speaker. Megan?

Megan Gildin:

Great. Thank you so much, Ruth. It's so important to hear about the Free to Learn initiative, especially as we dive into the topic of navigating conflicts today. Now is my pleasure to welcome Meaghan Wheat from the Program on

Intergroup Relations and Summer Youth Dialogues Program at the University of Michigan. As Ruth shared, Meaghan will provide some foundational context for our discussion today on using intergroup dialogues, as an intervention and preventative practice for intergroup conflict. I'll pass it to you, Meaghan.

Meaghan Wheat:

Thank you so much, Megan. So as Megan mentioned, I'm going to talk to you all about the Summer Youth Dialogues program. So I will get started in intergroup dialogue. So I wanted to give you a little overview of what I'll be talking about today. I'm going to start first with talking about intergroup dialogue, what it is and why it's important. I'm starting there because it's the basis of the Summer Youth Dialogues program, where we specifically do intergroup dialogue with high school students around Metro Detroit. So after we talk about that, I'll tell you about the Summer Dialogues program. I'll dig into a little bit of my experience with the program and the impact that it's had on me, having worked with it for over 10 years now. And then I'm going to give you a couple of resources and takeaways because we all love some takeaways and resources from webinars.

So first I'll touch on intergroup dialogue: What is it? So as you can see here, I've written it's semi-structured meetings across people from different and similar social identity groups led by peer facilitators. And then one example as a dialogue topic would be race and ethnicity. So if the intergroup dialogue topic is race and ethnicity, we have students who are from maybe white racial backgrounds, from Latinx racial backgrounds, from Black racial backgrounds, and all ethnicities as well.

Intergroup dialogue generally takes place in a smaller group of people with about eight to 14 participants and two peer facilitators. So if they're happening at the college level, the facilitators are undergrad or graduate student, and with the Semi-Dialogues program, the peer facilitators are undergraduate and graduate student who are near peer to the high school age students. Intergroup dialogue also follows the four-stage Michigan model of intergroup dialogue, at least we do here at the program and intergroup relations that founded this model.

The first stage ... And as I mentioned before, these are semi-structured meetings, and this is where the semi-structured comes from. The eight to 12 weeks that intergroup dialogue happens follows each into these stages. So stage one takes about two to three weeks, and it's really focused on forming and building relationships. In intergroup dialogue, we talk about a lot of maybe difficult and things that you don't talk about often in society such as race, racism and people's individual experiences with those. So it's very important to form a foundation of knowing each other, to be able to have those difficult conversations. Stage two, which again takes two to three weeks, is about exploring differences and commonalities of experience. So even though people might share the same racial or ethnic identity, for example, in a race and ethnicity dialogue, that doesn't mean they have all of the same experiences. And so this is really about figuring out for individuals, but also for the group

what experiences do we share, what experiences are different? And how does that really define our lives and what we're bringing into this space?

Stage three again, which takes about two or three weeks, mostly three weeks, is really all about exploring and discussing hot topics or current events. So things are happening all of the time that affect our social identities, and this is the chance to really talk about it in that group setting and be able to explore. Stage four is really a culmination of the other stages, of really we've learned all of this, we've learned more about each other, and now what are we going to do with that learning? So it's about action planning and alliance building and figuring out what the next stage is and how we want to move forward.

So why is this important? So intergroup dialogue has three core educational goals, consciousness raising, building relationships across differences and conflicts, and strengthening individual and collective capacities to promote justice. Conflict is inevitable. It exists. So this is one semi-structured way to really address the intergroup conflict. So not just between individuals but between social groups that existed for a long time, and really figure out how do we come up stronger?

I also think about intergroup dialogue as an intervention and a preventative practice. So intervention being intergroup conflict has existed for a long time and this is one way for us to talk about it, and to come up with some other steps and figure out if there's another way that we really want to live and go about the world. I also think about it as a preventative practice because it's a space of learning, where we can learn about people who are different from us or even maybe people who are similar but have different experiences. And figure out how do we not continue to perpetuate some of this harm that results from intergroup conflict, and how do we deal with it in a healthy way?

One thing I also wanted to address is that one way that intergroup conflict manifests is between different individuals. So maybe for instance, there's bullying in a school and someone's being bullied based on their sexual orientation. That is a manifestation of intergroup conflict between two individuals. And another type of conflict that intergroup dialogue really addresses is intrapersonal conflict. So we're each given messages every day from media, from institutions, from people in our lives about the way that we're supposed to behave based on our social identities. And so in intergroup dialogue, we get to really dive into do we want to fall in line to those narratives or do we want to be different? And both of those answers are okay. But it's really about thinking about that intrapersonal conflict that I think we all experience.

So this next slide, I wanted to include some testimonials from STEM students who have taken our intergroup dialogue courses at the college level, because I always enjoy hearing from people who have done this more recently. So I will give you all a couple of seconds just to read from some of these slides and to hear about other people's experiences.

Great. I know that wasn't too much time, but I want to make sure I'm not going over. So now I really want to dig into what is the Summary Dialogues program. As I mentioned before, part of the foundation of the program is intergroup dialogue, so that's what the students are coming together to do. But overall, the program is a partnership between the school of social work and the program on intergroup relations at the University of Michigan. This program came about because Metropolitan Detroit is one of the most segregated places in the United States, but we also have these pockets of diversity. So there are people from different backgrounds, but they just don't often come together and really have interaction. So this program was created so that young people specifically can come together to talk about their experiences and hopefully be able to create some community change based on what they have learned.

So I list some of the program goals here, to increase youth dialogues and race and ethnicity, to enable young people to build relationships with others who are different from them. And as you'll notice, this is straight off of one of the goals from one of the first slides I talked about in stage one, which is about forming and building relationships.

The next goal being plan action projects that challenge discrimination and create change. And this really gets into that stage four piece that I mentioned a couple of slides ago, as well as build school and community capacity for work of this type. We also seek to promote youth participation in public policy, involve supportive adults in working with young people and engage diverse youth in a social justice pre-college program. And then as I'll mention on this next slide, part of the program is the students get to come to the University of Michigan and learn about campus, but also to give them resources if they were to pursue post-secondary education. So about financial aid, about writing essays and all of those things that people might need to pursue a higher education.

So the size of the program is about 60 to 80 high school students, and they're all from across Metropolitan Detroit. So we partner with community organizations and school districts from around the region who have decided that they would like to be a part of our program, and they recruit students to be a part of this program. Since it's a summer program, it runs from mid-June to early August, and we meet on Saturdays at different locations all across the Metropolitan area. So one week we might be in Grosse Pointe, one week we might be in Dearborn. One week we might be in Detroit. One week we might be in Novi. And part of this experience is that not only do students get to meet other people that are different from them, but also go to different places that they might not have gone to before. In Metropolitan Detroit, people don't often travel around the Metro area too much, and so this is also a great experience for those students.

This is actually a photo from when I was a participant in Summer Youth Dialogue. So I thought that I would include this. It's really fun. So as I mentioned before, just some reiterations. The dialogues are facilitated by undergraduate and graduate students from the University of Michigan who are trained in intergroup dialogue facilitation. So that's that near peer facilitation piece. And

the Summer Youth Dialogue program follows the four-stage Michigan model of intergroup dialogue, which I outlined previously in the presentation. So next, I wanted to share with you some of my experience with the Summer Youth Dialogue program. I actually first became aware of the program when I was in high school. I was a participant over 10 years ago. And it was so impactful and transformative that I planned the rest of my couple years around how can I continue to work with this program. So I then went to undergrad here and I did logistics for the program. I facilitated. And now in my full-time professional role, I'm a dialogue manager, so I work with the undergrad and graduate students who are facilitating and trained them and support them.

One of the reasons why I find this experience so impactful, and I keep coming back, they can't get me to leave, is because it gave me some opportunities that I had never had before and that I really cherished. One of those is to consider my role as a member of social groups. I'd never really gotten the chance to reflect on what it means to be a biracial, white-presenting person. And for the first time, I'm being asked to do that and really get to consider what that means to me, or what it means to be a woman. And I just found that to be a very impactful experience, like I said.

It also helps me advocate for social change. It gave me the tools to plan community projects to advocate for young people. A big piece of the program that I didn't mention before is youth voice and youth empowerment. And that was something that I think really changed the way that I interacted with the world. On a more individual level, it helped me make change in my own life, to live a value-based and thoughtful life. I was able to really consider how I wanted to live my life through the program because it has you think about the actions that you take and why you take them, rather than just moving each day one foot in front of the other. And then as is presented in the first stage, it helps me cultivate intentional relationships with others.

So next part, I'm going to get into some resources and takeaways. And all of these can be found on our program's website and they're part of a series called IGR Insights. This first snippet delineates between dialogue, debate, and discussion. All three of these are forms of communication and conversation that we might have with other people, and they all have their place. They're all important. But I think often when we are talking about conflict and really difficult conversations, the place that we want to land is dialogue. And sometimes, if it gets heated, we might end up in debate or we might always stay in discussion because we don't know how to do dialogue. And so I think this handout is really helpful for figuring out what are the components of dialogue and how can we encourage ourselves to stay there and how can we recognize when we're not there?

This next snippet talks about these four different forms of listening. And again, these different types of listening are good for different places. But when we have a specific intention for the conversation that we're having, we want to be able to stay in that type of listening. So you'll see that generative listening, for example, is what we encourage for facilitators of intergroup dialogue to be in.

And if they know about global and internal and active, they can be able to stay in generative listening. So I think this is another really great resource.

And finally, I wanted to show you some of our community guidelines that we use for dialogue. At the beginning of every single one of our dialogues that go on for 12 weeks, we talk about these community guidelines, to be in agreement on what they mean, but also that we agree to stick to them. As you can see from my presentation, and you can probably guess, some of these conversations talk about really difficult, really uncomfortable ... Sometimes have conversations where there's a lot of conflict and a lot of disagreement. But if we can agree to be respectful and to stay on the same foundation and balance, we can better figure that out. And so this is really to get everyone on the same page and everyone is committed to using and staying within these guidelines. So this is a really important tool for us, and I hope that it can be an important tool for you too.

So that takes me to the end of what I wanted to share with you today. Thank you so much for listening and enjoy the rest of the webinar. So I'll pass it back to you, Megan.

Megan Gildin:

Great, thank you so much, Meaghan, for such an insightful presentation. I'm really left thinking about the ways intergroup dialogue and all the resources you've shared. It could be used with students and adults alike to bridge differences and navigate conflict. You can see all the love that you're getting from the reactions from our participants. So I'm going to venture a guess that they agree.

All right, so we will now move into our next portion with our relationships. First coaches from the school district, from Philadelphia. I think we have our lovely students that are just getting off of school. So I think we maybe have one that is still in transition from school to home or on the bus. So we'll welcome them in as they're able. So I want to introduce three individuals to you. We have Destiny Hamilton, Scarlett Quast, and Stephen Tetskowski. So all three of these folks are youth relationships, first coaches and support restorative practices in their respective schools in the school district of Philadelphia.

So I think what I'd like to do is maybe we can start, I have got one individual still on the bus, so maybe if we want to start actually with Scarlett, if you're okay, beginning to share about your experience creating that safe space in school communities to build relationships.

Scarlett Quast:

Okay. Yeah. Hi, I'm Scarlett. And I'm in sixth grade and today I'm going to be sharing the experience I had participating in a circle, looking at the ... Oh, my bad. My camera's not on, sorry, I'm just going to restart. But I participated in a circle looking at the sixth grade minor's behavior report with my class, the dean of students, my teacher, and the restorative justice coach at my school. We considered December and January statistics during the circle with a notice and a wonder. The purpose of this circle was to inform students so that we as the

class can positively impact the grade through open discussion, leading to less conflict and disruptions.

Participants showed interest by looking deeply at the grass and asking questions about the referral rate and how the time of day could affect referrals. We noticed that transition times had the highest number of referrals, and as a group and a class, we could reset with a brain break or stretching because our energy needs to be released when we are seated for a while. The grade brainstormed what supports we need to be our best selves, like drop-in hours with the dean and counselor to reduce class cutting. We close the circle with ways to take action and our voices heard.

Megan Gildin:

Great. Thank you so much, Scarlett. I think that is such a wonderful example of how you as a class got to understand what you needed to put in place to make sure that you all were feeling supported and you have that community. And as you can see, you are likewise getting a lot of love in the chat there from reactions from folks. So thank you so much for sharing.

Let's see, and then I'll see ... I know Destiny was in transition, but Destiny, if you're able to join from where you are at the moment, if you want to come off mute or just throw on the chat if you're still on the bus here.

All right, so Destiny's still on the bus, so I think maybe what we'll do, I'm thinking we'll maybe move to our panel discussion and then as our students are settled, we'll come back and we'll hear more from them. So we'll move to our next panel and we'll loop our students back in towards the end.

All right, so I want to introduce and share some additional panelists to talk about different approaches to supporting students and navigating conflict, and bridging differences. So in addition to our relationships, first coaches, we welcome Morgan Patel, who is an AP Human Geography and NSL teacher at Montgomery Blair High School in Maryland. And Chris Smith, the director of curriculum and strategic engagement at the New York City Commission on Human Rights. So welcome to Morgan and Chris.

So we'll dive in with our first question, if you can tell us about your approach to navigating conflict or difficult conversations. And we'll start with Chris.

Chris Smith:

Thank you, Megan, and good afternoon everyone that's tuned in. My name is Chris Smith. I am the director of Curriculum and Strategic engagement at the New York City Commission of Human Rights, which is a city agency in New York City that enforces the anti-discrimination law in New York City. So if anyone experiences discrimination when trying to get a job, trying to get a home or just out in a public space, our agency receives those claims and investigates those claims. But my role at the Commission on Human Rights is within our Community relations bureau, which is tasked in providing community education and outreach. And I work specifically with young people in New York City.

So from our many different programs, I am in workshops, I am the person that usually edits or creates those things as well as working on strategic ways to engage youth. One of our longest-standing program, which is relevant to today's discussion is our peer mediation program, which our peer mediation program at the commission has been in place since 2003. And the purpose of this program is to really work with young people in schools to establish a permeation program where young people are leading in addressing the conflicts that they see going on amongst their peers. So we go through a 10-week training session with youth where we talk about things such as how to ask questions, active listening, being able to identify some of the underlying needs that aren't always openly shared externally with the conflict.

And also since we enforce the anti-discrimination law, being able to show students how discrimination and conflict can sometimes intersect where forms of bullying can be based on sexual orientation or race or some of the different protected categories that are under our law. So making sure that we are teaching students ways to be the leaders in navigating some of those conflicts that may cross discriminatory lines is really the purpose of our peer mediation program.

Megan Gildin: Thank you so much, Chris for sharing that perspective and I'll pass it over to Morgan to share about your approach.

Morgan Patel: Yes. Hi everyone. Welcome Chris. It sounds like you have a really cool job. That is just cool. So I am Morgan. I teach high school students. So some of what Chris was saying is very similar; is just teaching youth how to talk and not ... Sometimes they're trying to do something that they think is right but the tone comes off wrong or something like that where it's like a lot of it is just setting up how to start the conversation, which I think is one of the hardest parts. But once that's done, it's much easier. So similar to some of what he said is I make a lot of rules for engagement before we have these conversations. Literally sitting down and saying, this is going to be a hard conversation and we're going to listen actively and we're not going to judge someone else's background or where they come from because that's their experience.

And a lot of it is we are not here to figure out who's right; we are here to learn from each other and we are different humans. And I teach classes of upwards of 32 students at once and I teach at a very diverse school. And it is very common that there are multiple people on opposite sides of very difficult conflicts. And therefore setting up these rules for engagement is very important because I don't want students talking over each other. I want people actively listening, but being honest about the fact that I'm also nervous to have this difficult conversation, I think makes them more comfortable too because they realize like, oh, it's okay to be unsure of what to say as long as we're all realizing that we can respect each other and grow from it. And I think that's important for them to see.

Another thing I do is helping them adjust their thinking. All of us do this as humans that we're very used to either or someone has to be right. And shifting

to a both and framework where it is very much like, okay, what I'm feeling is valid, but also what they're feeling is valid and I need to respect that. And honestly, I think most of the world would not even have these conflicts if we could all think like that and act like that. And I think that's more difficult to do in person because we all naturally go to the either or. So constantly going back to, Hey, let's open up our mind to hearing what the other side has to say and not your side can be right too. We can both hear this out.

So I think a lot of it is opening up the conversation correctly, setting up those rules. And then also, I'll talk about this later a little more, but also giving students different ways to process information. I usually tend to limit open dialogue with really difficult things such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because I know who's in the room, but I also don't know who's in the room. I don't know their exact background and I don't want someone to say something that's going to directly offend someone else. So I kind of open it up for more individual processing instead of having an open dialogue if I feel that that's necessary for that.

Megan Gildin:

Great. Thank you so much for sharing Morgan. And that leads us straight into our next question of what needs to be in place for your program or your approach to be successful. We're going to start with Stephen Tetkowski, who is one of our youth restorative relationships-first coaches joining us. If you want to share a little bit about your approach and what needs to be in place.

Stephen Tetkowski:

First, good morning, everybody. I'm sorry I was late. I literally just got home from school right this second. I just jumped in my room. For RF to work in any space, you need individuals that are willing to be open-minded, these people need to be open-minded because RF, we talk about a lot of diverse topics from anything from race to equity to just normal problems from every day. And you need to be willing to see these perspectives from a different light and a different somebody's else's shoes and walk a mile in their shoes. Then we look at something in a different way and it can completely change the way you see any topic like the Israeli topic, like one talk with somebody who's from there or it completely changes the way you look at things and it can completely change how you think about it and how you go about talking about these things.

And just as we need open-minded people, we also need an open space somewhere where students and RF members are comfortable to express their feelings, opinions, and emotions. So creating this circle and this bond and this trust can really open up to people actually sharing their inner thoughts and feelings. I feel like for a lot of kids at this time, they don't just give trust to anybody. I'm not going to give you trust, you have to gain it and then we will actually start moving on. But for RF to also work, we need leaders. You need people that are willing to have these uncomfortable conversations. The ones who don't shy away from conflicts, the ones who attack it. And without these leaders, there won't be RF because these leaders are so important because they are the people who embody RF.

And RF wouldn't work without these guidelines that we put in, speak and listen from a heart, speak and listen our respect, keep it 100, these are the guidelines that keep us rolling and keep us on track. And these guidelines are like train tracks. They keep us in the right direction. If we steer away from it, we always come back and we might have to do another circle where we just go over these guidelines and we make sure that if everybody follows them, we can have a successful circle.

So for me, the biggest contribution is support. So let's just say me and Destiny, who is another RF member who is so good at her job and let's say me and her see different things, but I support her and I respect her opinion, even though I don't agree with it, it can still be a successful circle. Everything doesn't have to be agreement or whatever, a disagreement. We've had circles where we have people crying, we have people sad and we leave frustrated, but that doesn't mean it was a bad circle. It's just these circles are very, very touchy and very, very emotional. So we just need people who are willing to be trusted and just can keep whatever said there stays there and that's the most important thing.

Megan Gildin:

Great. Thank you so much, Stephen. I so appreciate you talking about sharing these guidelines and sticking to the ways that we're interacting with each other that it's not necessarily that we'll agree, but we have this shared trust and respect for one another. I'll now pass it over to Morgan.

Morgan Patel:

Hello again everyone. So some things are very similar to what Stephen said. As a teacher, I've been teaching for 11 years and the biggest thing I do is building individual and community relationships within my classroom. It helps with everything. It creates a safe space where students ... This is not something that is going to happen in a week. I spend the first two weeks of school just not worrying about teaching subject material and really spending time. Sometimes we'll do something about subject, but it'll be a fun game where kids get to know each other in the classroom. And I'm very upfront about the fact that, which this is something Stephen said too, is I'm about mutual respect.

I think a lot of high school students are very used to meeting an authority figure at school, and that person assumes that they should respect them because they're an authority figure.

And that's just not to me how a classroom should be. It doesn't make students comfortable. Respect should be earned on both sides. That's like I tell them from the very first day, I'm going to have bad days too, but when I come in here, and this is where we learn, but if you're having a bad day, tell me and it'll help us both navigate each other respectfully without upsetting someone. And setting up things like that make students realize they can be themselves, they can learn in that environment and then they want to show the same respect to you and their peers. So it helps limit a lot of things that could happen and conflict that could happen just by doing the work ahead of time. So I really spend a lot of time, I'm always like the one in the group teaching the same subject.

All the other teachers that's behind because I'm like, "Hey, I spent two weeks playing games." And they're like, "You played games?" But it puts so much ... I don't have as many classroom management issues and I can have difficult conversations a few months into the school year where I know that students will tell me if they're individually upset and they'll have the courage to say things that they might not have had if we didn't build that community. And then the individual relationships are also important is knowing what is a trigger for certain students because of something that might've happened to them to make sure that you're giving that individual safe space. But that positive classroom environment and the safe space is so important to me anyway. And I don't think these conversations can happen in classrooms without that. Another big thing too is to realize that every student learns differently.

I always used to hate, I loved school, but I hated cold calling. I hated not knowing if I was going to get called on. And I don't believe in putting students on the spot in that way because so many don't talk in class. That's fine. They will send me a page-long Google review of what we did or Google Doc review, and it's beautiful. It's like just letting students be who they are. Many want to send you a TikTok video in response to what you said. It's like, okay, that's a way to process it. I think meeting them on their level, they respect you more and then they're willing to give you that and you can have those difficult conversations. So the setup to me is very important and I spend a lot of months building that.

Megan Gildin:

All right. Thank you so much. Yes, that foundation is so important. And as an introvert, I appreciate you understanding that not everyone loves to be cold called or speaking out loud. So having those multiple ways is amazing. I'll pass it over to Chris.

Chris Smith:

Yes. So a lot of my fellow panelists hit on some similar points. So I see there's definitely a lot of overlap in the work, which means we're doing the right thing, right? I'll say one of the things that's very pivotal with any form of programming that we do at Commission on Human Rights with young people is really, one, making sure that the schools that we work with have some kind of understanding of their climate and culture. There's been plenty of times that I've worked in schools where there's the approach of we just want to bring you in and make this situation go away, but you're calling us because it's like insensitivities being expressed due to race or sexual orientation. There's actual incidents that happened based on a discriminatory event. This isn't going to magically just go away with our presence. So there has to be a deeper understanding of how invested everybody within the school community is in addressing some of these different harms that these students experience in real time.

I always say, which is why I love working with young people, is that they're the most honest. They're the most authentic and they are living in a time where they are experiencing discrimination in real time. And sometimes as adults, we unconsciously lose sight of that. So making sure that the climate and culture in the spaces truly assessed that. I mean, my mother always told me it takes a village to raise a child. So making sure that the school community is fully

invested. So with our peer remediation program, it's not only us working with guidance counselors and people that may be appointed as the coordinators of the program, but also administration, principals and assistant principals. What resources can you provide to support this program working with the different teachers, if you happen to see something that you may want to refer to mediation, what does that process look like internally? Making sure that these types of programming is embedded within the school culture and not just doesn't live with only a few people.

And my final point of what I feel is very pivotal in this work is we have to view students as partners, not participants. And I say that very intentionally because I'm a firm believer in we just give young people the guidance for them to give us the direction. And they can't do that if we are just viewing them as participants. And as Morgan mentioned before, just coming in because we're adults, we're the authority figure, but that respect has to be earned from both angles. And also just making sure that young people feel ownership over any program that you're bringing into their space. How can they utilize their talents to spread awareness about a program that's coming to their school? How can they utilize some of the talents that they have that we often disregard because we want to be the adult and make them the participant rather than a partner in cultivating that space. So those are some of the key pivotal things that I believe are very important when it comes to programming with young people.

Megan Gildin:

All very important. And that youth-adult partnership piece absolutely is key. I can see a lot of folks reacting and I think they would agree as well. With that in mind, we're going to go back over to Stephen for our next question. What effects have you seen or would you like to see in your school communities?

Stephen Tetkowski:

So RF started my freshman year. I'm a junior now, so right away I was a part of the first group. I'm going to be a part of the first graduating class next year that actually started my freshman year, and that was the first year in school. So I didn't get to see the before, but I definitely saw the after effect as it's progressed. So if we want to get a little bit personal, I'm obviously not going to name anybody, but a teacher I have is... I run classes on Wednesdays during advisory, and this teacher, who I run his class, has been struggling with his career and what he wants to do. And I've really seen him actually tap into his actual feelings and his emotions, that kind of set me back for a second and I was just like, you don't get that side of teachers. Even if you see him at the grocery store and you're like, how do you have a life outside of school? It sets you back sometimes, because you don't realize they actually have lives and have struggles, and have these feelings.

And a big part of RF, that I've already seen, is these teachers come alive and teachers last year were like, I've never seen these kids speak in my life, and now they're talking and I know their favorite color, I know their favorite movie, I know what subjects they like, what they hate, what they love about my class. And it kind of has brought to life passion and teachers are understanding what these kids want to learn and who they are as a person, but more importantly, you're learning who the teacher is, because if you can't connect to who a

teacher is, you really aren't going to learn as much as you want to learn. So I feel like RF has really brought a connection between them two and realized that just because they're teachers, doesn't mean they're on a different level. There should be a similar level of yes, you are an older person who's teaching me these things, but at the same time, we're all human and we're all these people who have these emotions and feelings, and everything. And without this compromise that we're actually gaining a lot of ground on, there isn't as much learning.

And something I would like to see is, so I go to art school, so then I have to play sports for public school. And me and my dad were talking about it the other day and I want to try to start something for sports, and kind of a big part of seeing athletes and art majors, and everybody let their creative side and their artistic side, and their athletes all come together and just talk about problems. Because I know a big part of football, I'm just the kicker, but I can see it because I don't do as much, and I can see these coaches and these players get in disagreements all the time, and these players have all this baggage that they bring to school, they bring to the football field, and so do these coaches have all this baggage and then they collide, and it's a big, not a mess, but it's a very big disagreement.

But if we can have these kids and these coaches get in a circle together and actually speak about the things that they're going through, and I feel like it'll be such a big understanding and they can work so much better, because say this kid just had a parent die over the weekend, and they've had so much going on, and they're building it up, and they get on the field and the coach is like, what are you doing? If the coach knows this kid's head space, he can pull him aside and actually have a good conversation with him instead of screaming at him and just letting him know that he doesn't know what he's doing. But if you knew his side of things or you know the coach just lost his other job and he just came to work, and he's so mad and he's been flipping out, you're like, all right coach, I understand where you're coming from, we can speak about it. For me, compromise is a big thing. I feel like there is no beauty without pain. There is no... It's all level. I feel like if we can keep this, you teach me, but we're on the same level and I feel the pain, I feel your sacrifice that you make on both sides, I feel like there's a big connection that has been going on throughout my school and I want more of it.

Megan Gildin:

I so appreciate that perspective and how you're thinking about what are all the different contexts and relationships where this can really have an impact and grow. It's very powerful and important. I'll pass it over to Chris to share.

Chris Smith:

Yes. So just really some of the things that I've seen, I've been working for the commission, will be 10 years for me in March, so I've been doing this work for a while, and our peer mediation program in particular, because it's been here since 2003, it had to evolve over time. So making sure when we are working with students on mediating different forms of conflict, making sure that we're incorporating practice scenarios that are culturally relevant to today. We're no longer in the era of this person copied off my homework, so let's use that as a practice mediation, like no. So being able to incorporate how social media can

exacerbate forms of discrimination, and really discussing that and seeing how can we work with young people to mediate those different things.

So I always say that to all students that I work with, you getting them to the table is a win. You're not going to always come out where people are shaking hands and they're friends the next day, but you got them to the table to really talk and hear each other out. So that's a win within itself and always focus on that point, because all it takes is better for them to be at the table and realize that they're just going to agree to disagree than for it to escalate into something further. So being able to make sure that we're working with them on practical things and actually having them create scenarios that they would like to include as a mock mediation. So including students in on that process a little bit more, adapting the program to the school. There was a time where we said we want 20 to 25 students to participate in this program, but the way New York City is set up, there are some schools that are smaller, other schools that are larger, so am I going to have a maximum minimum limit for students to join a program? So making sure that we're assessing the process fairly to any school that wants to work with us as well as making sure that we are implementing different practices that are specific to that particular school.

And I think one of the main positives that I've seen with some of the changes that we have made, and the pandemic has made us realize that we need to make a lot of changes to this program, which is why we are rebuilding, is just seeing students understand that they can utilize the skills that they have learned not in only mediation, but in their outside life and being able to learn how to communicate in public speaking. Some students get anxious about doing presentations aloud or speaking in large groups, so being able to arm them with some of those skills that can help alleviate some of those different things. And moving forward, I hope that we can continue to really place an emphasis on providing skills not to just satisfy a program requirement, but really giving them tools and traits that they can use outside of them being in our space, and for them to cultivate new spaces and take it a lot further than we have.

Megan Gildin: Thank you so much. I so appreciate that, keeping it relevant to the current context and what young people are facing so that it is meeting them where they are. All right, I'll send it over to Morgan next.

Morgan Patel: Hello, everyone, again. Yes, similar to what Steven and Chris both said. One thing I've noticed is that one very immediate effect is how many students thank you for having the difficult conversation and having the space to have it is like I think a lot of teachers, adults, stay away from those topics, because that's understandable. I tell them that I'm nervous to do those conversations, but by providing that space, you grow together. And very similar to what Steven said too about that empathy component between teachers and students specifically is so important of navigating, how Chris said, navigating your own life. I think what I try to teach the most is you have to deal with people in your life. No matter what job you have, you are going to have to deal with people. So learning how to do that appropriately, that you feel safe, they feel safe, and you build some kind of relationship community wherever you are, I think starts at

such a young age, and they have to feel comfortable to participate in their own way and have those difficult conversations.

I was particularly nervous this year to have not even a discussion, a lesson on the Israel-Palestinian conflict, understandably, but the number of students that thanked me after was incredible, because they're seeing these videos in their own context on TikTok and it's not explained, and adults have a difficult time explaining it because it is an extremely complicated thing, and they appreciated the space to understand what they're seeing in front of them. So I think an important effect is helping them navigate their own social media literacy, that it's so hard for even adults to know if what you're hearing on the news is accurate and you can't know if you're not taking the time to learn about something. So I think teaching them that that's something they can do on their own as they grow is really important.

So yeah, I just think I would love to see this continue, not just in my classroom, like Chris was talking about, the importance of understanding a school climate and so many... I feel like even some of the teachers sometimes in a school don't understand the school climate or even in their own classroom, and it can contribute to conflict. If you understand how things should be going and the larger climate of the school, you're going to avoid most conflicts. And they still come, of course they come, but you can avoid a lot of it by just taking the time to meet the students on their level, build that community, and have those safe conversations, have a safe space for them to really feel that they are owning things that they're seeing around them and able to understand it.

Megan Gildin:

Great. Thank you so much. And we'll move into our last question before we loop back around to our demonstration. So our last question for our panel is what is either a lesson you have learned or a hope you have for the future? We'll start with Stephen.

Stephen Tetkowski:

By the time I'm done, you guys are going to be tired of looking at me. I think one of the biggest lessons I've learned is that just because somebody doesn't show you that there's something wrong doesn't mean that there's not something there. And I've been doing RF for 2 and a half, the end of this year will be 3 years, and I've talked to so many people from different schools, different races, different religion, and everybody's obviously completely different in their own way. And for me, I know a lot of people who are like me, who let others see what they want them to see. So from the outside, you are this perfect person who doesn't have any problems, and I feel like that's a big thing with teachers is, you guys come into school and try to act like everything's okay, but once you get to the big root of problems, there are a lot of things that people don't see and things that you don't talk about.

And for me, RF has allowed me to become an open book in a metaphor way of, if somebody asked me how I'm doing, I will start to speak about some things that are bothering me. And if they ask me... There's this thing that people have to stop using good as an answer on how life is going. Because you go to the store, you ask the cashier, how's life doing? Good. Everywhere you go, it's just

like good. And obviously life can't always be great and good, and everything's sunshine and rainbows. And I feel like for me, RF has really brought that out of me to where I can really speak about things that I used to not be able to and not want to, because I was scared. But building this community in school and building this with the teachers and other students, I'm able to speak about these things and it's becoming a release.

And school isn't this, oh, I have to hold in all these emotions anymore. It's more of a, oh, I get to go to school, I get to see these people who do support me and who show me this love that I do need, and I'm able to lean on the community in school and I'm able to speak about these problems that I've been holding in. And if you crack down as many... So say you go to school and you have to hold it all in, that's another place that you have to hold it in. Now you have to leave school and now you have to hold it in more, and say you can't speak to your parents about things, now you have to hold it in more. But if you create as many spaces as possible for you to release, then there will start being more places where you can release and there's not as many as you can hold in, and that's when we really find out who these people really are.

You see a bully and you just automatically think they're this horrible person, but in reality, they have a horrible home life, and they come to school and they feel like they have to be this way. But if you create a space where these people can actually speak about their problems and actually just be who they want to be and who they are, truly, it's you almost see right through their soul and into their heart, and you really get to the softest part of them and it's really actually a truly amazing sight to see. And I've seen so many people who have changed over these past few years, and I've had so many friends who I didn't know any of these problems, but now the past 2 years, I've really learned about their life and I've really learned how to care for them, and how I can be there for them. And even if it's not talking to them physically, it might be just sending them a text message of, hey, I hope you're doing all right. Some people just need that and I feel like that's a big lesson of you don't have to be there all the time physically and have to speak to them, but more of just being there.

There's this book, Winnie the Pooh and Piglet, of how Winnie didn't want to speak about his problems and Piglet just sat there, and Winnie felt more of that than him actually trying to speak about things. And I love that, because that's a big part about me is I can't always express the way I'm feeling, but if you just sit there and I feel your body, it passes more over. And I feel like that's one of the biggest lessons that anybody can learn is just you don't have to always do things, but maybe just be there for the person.

Megan Gildin: Thank you so much for sharing. And I'm over here thinking about how often I respond, "I'm good", to people, and all the different ways that we can show care for one another. I'll send it over to Morgan.

Morgan Patel: Hello, everyone. So yes, I have many things. I'll just try to summarize a couple. As a teacher, I learn lessons every day about what to do and what not to do. Sometimes accidentally I learn them and sometimes it's the students just being

like, no, that's not going to work. I'm very self-reflective as a teacher. I'm constantly sending them a Google survey, did you like this lesson? What did you dislike? What did you like? Should I do it next year? Type of thing. So stuff like that helps me directly see effects of like, is this working? But I think one of the biggest things I've learned, especially with difficult conversations, is that you don't know who's in the room, and even when you do know who's in the room, you can't assume that someone, because of their background, experience, etc, has the same experience with someone as someone else.

And I think we all know that deep down, but we also kind of, like I said before, we're very quick to put people in categories. We're like, oh, they're a teacher, so they do this. They're students, so they do this. And that's just not the reality of life. And I think I constantly have to tell myself that, because as teachers, we are doing 7,000 things at once and it's very easy to make a mistake like that or assume something quickly, when you really have to slow down and be like, no, I need to actually hear these students out and know where they're coming from.

And I think the biggest lesson, overall that I'll end with, is for me, building up... I've always been very emotional myself and I've also always been very in tune with my emotions, and I think it took me a bit to realize that most people are not. I kind of figured it out my first year teaching where I'm like, why aren't you telling me if something's bothering you? And it's just not that simple. Most people say that I'm good and move on, and they're holding in huge things that are difficult to navigate normal life with. And I think the emotional intelligence of realizing where you're at and then applying that to others is probably the most important job of being a teacher. And like I said before, sometimes that also means that I come in and I'm like, guys, it's not the day, it's not the day to mess with me, and I hope you do the same thing if you're feeling that. Being aware of your own emotions and how others react to you is really important in life, no matter what you do.

Megan Gildin: Yeah. I so appreciate you surfacing that emotional awareness, both of yourself and others, and that dynamic that comes into play. I'll pass it over to Chris now.

Chris Smith: Yes. Oh, a lot of lessons, a lot of lessons learned, but just some that really stick out. One with, again, navigating through difficult conversations around discrimination. I tend to realize that discrimination stems from ignorance and fear. People fear what and who they don't understand. So being able to one, cultivate a space where we can have open and honest dialogue in where we're at, and making sure that we're not overly correcting people. You want to make sure that you create a space where people can share how they truly feel without the heightened sensitive. They may have said something that is wrong or may be viewed as insensitive, but we want to make sure that they share their authentic feelings, but still make sure that we cultivate a space where everyone is respected and referred to the guidelines when necessary as well.

And my final lesson I feel like I learned in this space is there's strength and vulnerability and love in accountability. So in order for me to acknowledge my ignorance, which results in how I discriminate against other people or I may

project my ignorance onto others, being able to be vulnerable and say, I don't know about this person or how can we foster a dialogue where I get to know you and your personal experiences, where it gives me insight on how you navigate through life? Because we all have different forms of blinders that may prohibit us from really seeing another person's experiences, and we don't always have to relate in order for me to empathize with your experience. So really fostering a collaboration with many different individuals to cultivate a space for young people to be able to see each other in their own shoes without having to relate to that person's struggle.

Megan Gildin:

Thank you so much for sharing. I think that strength and vulnerability, love and accountability is a great phrase to close out our panel discussion portion for today. So I think what we'll do now is I'll say thank you to Chris and Morgan for sharing, and I'm going to pass it back over to Stephen to share a few of the relationships first practices that they use in school.

Stephen Tetkowski:

Hello, everybody, again. So obviously you guys know I'm an RF coach, so relationships first is the actual meaning. But RF is a well-rounded community that's foundation is built on trust, honesty, thoughtfulness, communication, and liberation of the mind. To keep these principles in place, we have implemented those guidelines I brought up earlier. These guidelines are speak and listen from the heart, speak and listen with respect, stay attentive in circle. What happens in circle stays in circle, that is probably one of the most important ones for me, and keep it 100.

So the very baseline foundation, tier one, in RF is community building circles. It's a very surface level circle, so the questions aren't too deep, you're just trying get to know everybody. And the RF coaches get a broad understanding of where the students are at with themselves and each other. Furthermore, these circles base meaning is to bring joy to the community while strengthening their bonds with us, the RF coaches, so we can start building that trust, but more importantly, with each other, and teaching these kids how to work together while learning more about each other. The people running these said circles, as you just learned, are us, the RF coaches, these youth leaders. These coaches have a big role in our school, because they are the role models of RF. So they're kind of like the preachers. They're the ones who are the everyday people. So we're the ones who go in on Wednesday and run these baseline circles and who are running these circles that sometimes get even deeper. And our coaches come in every Monday and teach us, but we're the ones who are these everyday battles. And we have an immense amount of training that has morphed us into these leaders that are available when problems arise between people or just personal level problems. Maybe it's just a home problem, or just as simple as you have a disagreement with somebody.

Another benefit of all this training is our ability to navigate these students into communicating their feelings in a comfortable and nonjudgmental space. So these circles that we are creating, we want to make sure you guys are as comfortable as possible. So we do baseline questions, like I said, tier one to

make sure you guys get to know each other, learn to have fun with each other before we get all these deep questions in.

And then once we get these deep questions, you guys have already started to trust each other enough and know each other enough to where you guys can actually express your feelings. Then we get to tier two. Tier two of RF is harm and healing circles. This tier gets more into dealing with conflicts and personal life. So that is these internal problems, the problems at home, problems with teachers, all of that is a big part of tier two. And these circles are usually between one to three students or teachers that have problems that we're trying to resolve, or you don't have to resolve problems, like we said before. And I think Chris brought it up, it doesn't always have to come to an agreement. It can be agree to disagree, and we can live around each other. Like say I don't like one of my teachers, we don't have to agree on something that we like each other. It can just be me and him have respect for each other so we can be in the same class and actually just live amongst each other.

And harmony healing can unlock a lot of past trauma and a lot of emotions. So it's very important that these circles are held very sacred. And what is said there stays there is one of the guidelines I went over. And these harm and healing circles don't work if what's said there stays there, because say I'm talking about a problem about one kid and the RF coach goes and tells this kid about the problems I'm talking about, well, now the circle doesn't work anymore because the trust and the respect isn't there.

And without that trust and respect, there is no RF, there is no community, there is no trust. And without trust, nothing will be solved and nothing will be worked on, nothing will be changed. So to sum up, RF's main goal is to be a support system in a community that gives students and teachers the space to use their voices powerfully and be able to convey their emotion without being judged and feeling like they can't do it just because they don't want people to see the wrong side of them or they don't want people to go and tell everybody else. No, that's the complete opposite of what RF is.

RF is the place where basically you're just talking to an anonymous person. You want to be able to just say whatever you need and get it off your chest and be comfortable with them knowing your problems without knowing that they're not going to go tell everybody else.

Megan Gildin:

Hey, thank you so much, Stephen, for that overview of the practices and how they show up for you all. So we'll now transition, we'll close out the formal content delivery section of our webinar and then move into our live A&A. And we'll be pulling questions from those submitted through the Q&A box. So make sure to add any lingering questions that you have now.

So I want to thank each of our presenters and panelists for the excellent information and strategies shared today. This is such an important topic to keep in mind as we continue to make our schools safe and supportive learning environments for all students.

We also want to thank you, over 350 people, for your active engagement, questions and comments during the webinar. So I want to share a few things we have upcoming. Feel free, or we would love to have you join us for the next webinar in this Free to Learn Miniseries on February 14th, a little Valentine's Day treat for you all, as well as our next Human Trafficking webinar that will take place on January 31st. So we will send out announcements for each webinar, and be on the lookout for those in the coming weeks.

Again, we greatly appreciate your time today and thank you for all that you do to provide students with safe supportive learning environments. Again, we encourage you to stay with us until 4:30 Eastern to hear our speakers and panelists' responses to the questions that were submitted by our audience.

So finally, I want to share the link for the feedback form. So please take a few minutes to provide us with feedback on today's session and share what topics you'd like to see in future sessions. In addition, please visit our website where today's presentation will be posted. You'll find an archived version of the presentation slides and links to the resources referenced during today's webinar. And then again, as a reminder, we will be capturing all questions that were posted in the Q&A so that we make sure that information is shared with the U.S. Department of Education to inform upcoming lessons from the field webinars.

All right, so without further ado, we'll begin our Q&A. So I'll get all of our panelists and speakers back on screen to be able to answer some of the burning questions that you all have.

All right, so let's see. One question that has come up for folks. There's a lot of conversation around relationship building and the importance of building that community. I'm curious, the challenge that was put in the Q&A box was how do you balance that relationship building with all the other competing priorities you have in school? So knowing that you need to get through your academic content and so many other things, what are some strategies to be able to make sure that you're meeting all of the needs?

Morgan Patel:

There's a similar question about how do I get in trouble with admin for teaching community building instead of the curriculum? Which is in the same vein. It's not that I'm not... Maybe I didn't word it well, but taking the time to build the community at the beginning makes getting through the curriculum and everything else much smoother. So to me it's worth, quote, unquote, some would say "wasting that time." It's not a waste to me because it's very much prevents a lot of classroom management issues and helps you get through... It creates buy-in with students very quickly that they're like, "Oh, I want to come to this class and I want to learn in this class." And it avoids almost every major issue just by you taking the time to get to know them.

So some of it is that I'm lucky to teach at a school where not only is it a very big school, so you kind of have to take the time to do that because it's a 4,000

person school, there's about 3,500 students and about 300 staff members. It's like a small city. Many students go to colleges that are smaller than that.

So not only is it like it's hard for admins to keep track of everyone, but they also, because of that, they trust us as professionals to do what we need to do to get students where they need to go. So I'm lucky to teach at a school like that where they're not, you know, "You need to teach this on this day and this on this day," is they're giving us the autonomy, which is absolutely, if there's other teachers on here, we know that's how it should be. We should be treated like professionals and be able to have that autonomy to do what we think is right for the students, which I know does not always happen. So I'm lucky with that.

But to me it's always worth the time to pause. And even some days when I'm like, "We're not going to get through this lesson today," but stopping and having a fun conversation about a random, I mean it can be the most random thing like, "Do you like ice cream or cookies?" And it'll be like a 20-minute tangent about why cookies are better. It can be absolutely trivial and random, but taking that time for them to yell at each other about something that is so minor, then the next time you have a difficult conversation, they know how to talk to each other and they're interested in having the conversation.

So to me it's always worth the time. But that's probably, might just be my opinion, just in my experience, that's what I've found.

Megan Gildin:

Absolutely. Thank you so much for sharing. I want to shoot over to our RF coaches. We've got questions for you in the Q&A. How did you become a coach and why? And what attracted you to this? But I want to start with Destiny, who's able to join us now to share a little bit about her experience.

Destiny Hamilton:

Hi, my camera's going to be off for a second because I just got home. But I became a coach when we came back to school in my sophomore year, right? Yeah, my sophomore, I'm sorry. And the reason I had become one was because I was a part of the DIC for my school at that time. And Ms. Davis who was running that was kind of semi involved in it before she had gotten more in depth with RF.

And to a certain degree, her recommendation was for me to try it out. And when we had started our school, it was a recommendation from teachers. So a bunch of teachers had gave students, including me because I had a few recommendations from my teachers to join it, where they gave us that information for RF and the start of it and I decided to do it. So we had our meetings every day. I can't remember what day it was that we had our meetings, but from there it started on.

We had trained in the first section. I don't know if some of y'all know Smith. I don't... What is his first name? I'm sorry. I don't know. I don't like going off the scripts. I really apologize. So with Smith, he trained us for the past three years. He left us recently, but I'd say he was pretty good at helping us learn the ropes. Our school kind of became the representation of us to a degree because it

started at my school. And from there on out, I got a lot more responsibilities for it because I was consistently showing up and I was consistently just actively participating and in the circles whenever I could. And they liked how I led my circles at times. That was kind of just what brought me into it.

But in the emotional side, I think some of it had to do with some of the reasons I joined DEIC, which was just as a student to have my voice heard because for a very long time in my life, because I had actually dealt with bullying and stuff, I felt like I didn't have a voice from a majority of my lifespan. And I'm only 18. So that's a long time to feel like you didn't have people who would listen to you. So you didn't have a voice really. So that was also my opportunity because my mother always told me to use my voice, and I found that participating in these things helped me.

RF has helped me with stage fright, so has DEIC, which is... I didn't say what that was. It's a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Council. When I consistently would get on stage to make announcements for us, I would make announcements for when we would accept new rounds of RF coaches to train as the other cohorts would be on different sections. But in general, I think it was more of me just trying to find my space in semi the background because I do a lot of things that certain coaches don't know about, it's not always known about. And I've done a decent amount of harm and healing circles, but you don't disclose that exactly what circles you had and all that stuff. But I feel like it was just a way for me to build a structure for myself to also help others while helping myself get over some of the issues I had growing up.

Megan Gildin:

Thank you so much for sharing and sharing that personal connection of how this has helped you feel like you have a voice and feel heard, I think is so, so important as we think about this. Let's see where to go next.

So Meaghan, there are a few questions for you about the Summer Youth Dialogues program. One, there's a curiosity if facilitators are changed through the school of social work. And then we have an individual who has several high school students that would be great candidates for the Michigan program. So where can they find more information about how to get involved?

Meaghan Wheat:

Yeah, certainly happy to answer that and very exciting to hear that someone out there has students that would be great for the program. So at the university, we actually don't do any recruitment of students. We rely on our community partners, so community organizations and school districts to find students that they think would be a great fit because they have the connection with them and we don't.

So on our website, the Program in Intergroup Relations, or you can go to youthcivilrights.org, they have a whole kind of webpage about the Summer Youth Dialogues program that lists our partners. And if you're in Metropolitan Detroit and you have a connection to one of those community organizations or school districts, I would certainly recommend you get in touch with them, which is very exciting.

In terms of how the facilitators are trained. So the facilitators are actually trained through the program on Intergroup Relations, which is where I work. Yeah, I could go on forever about Intergroup Dialogue and I won't. There are many other different centers or programs or even courses at different higher education institutes across the country. For instance, there's an IGR at Villanova over in Philly. So there are other opportunities I think too, where people do this work as well. But yeah, the Program in Intergroup Relations Trades Facilitator is the short answer to that question.

Megan Gildin: Great. Thank you so much. And then we have a few questions in our Q&A around the similar topic of how do you partner with schools or how do you implement these practices in schools where there may be resistance, either within the school or from the larger school community? Any strategies or recommendations you may have?

Stephen Tetkowski: I could try to give my best input.

Megan Gildin: Go for it, Stephen.

Stephen Tetkowski: I mean, I'm not a teacher, so I don't see it from their side of things. I only see it from a student side of things. And a big part that I brought up in the beginning, it's me and Lou were talking about this before while I was writing all this stuff about what I wanted to speak about. And it was a big part of students nowadays, especially after COVID and my generation has been a bigger part of, we don't give respect, you have to gain it.

So a lot of kids when you first bring in something new that they don't know about, and like Chris said, a lot of people are scared about things that they don't know about and they don't know what the outcome will be and what it all entails and it scares them so they don't do it. So I think the biggest part is to try and connect to them on any way or shape or form.

If it's athletes, try and get them to relate to sports. If it's art, make them relate to art. It could be something as simple as do you guys support the local sports team? Do you guys watch a TV show? Something to get them sparked up. So my teacher, Mr. Pie, at my school every Friday, he would have a poll of, "If we had to eliminate one snack, what would it be?" And I know Morgan was talking a big part about that, about teaching. As long as you get them interactive and once they start having fun, they'll start opening up more and they'll start letting you guide them into different things. And that's a big part about what we do.

That's why our baseline circles is all about learning how to work together while having fun. And most of that is just activities and getting them to keep moving and having energy and having fun because once they have fun, they don't care what they're doing at that point and they're a lot more accepting of what you're going to do.

I think the more you can connect to them on a personal level and not just teacher or coach or if you can connect to them person to person, they'll be more accepting of what you have to offer.

Megan Gildin: Absolutely. Thank you so much for sharing. And Morgan?

Morgan Patel: Yeah, I can just speak to it from the teacher perspective. Teachers are notorious for being resistant to new things, which is so ironic because we're constantly throwing new things at students, but we're aware of it. So we have a similar thing right now where they're doing community circles. They didn't bring in an outside group, but it's being done by students in SGA is very similar. And I can speak to the staff meeting we just had, so much resistance from teachers or just annoyance at like, "Oh, another thing we have to do," right? That's like, I think making it real, like stuff like this, having students talk about their experience, having people like Chris that have done this for many years and be like, "This is the success rate we can show you," is much more meaningful on the teacher side because otherwise it can feel like another thing we're obligated to do that's being thrown at us without us having a choice in the matter.

So I think it's similar to how I teach, is show why it's important, get them interested and then it can make a better partnership.

Megan Gildin: Absolutely.

Chris Smith: Yes. Can you hear me now?

Megan Gildin: We can hear you now. Great.

Chris Smith: Okay. Yeah, microphone's act funny, so I apologize for that. Yes. So what I will say, and I think everybody kind of hit the answer on the head, but the only thing that I'll add is really making, at least in my line of work, making the material relevant.

I work for an agency that enforces the anti-discrimination law in New York City. So educating people on the law when people are checked out of government in general. So it's a matter of what does this program, what does this workshop or training, how does it serve me in my day-to-day capacity when all I'm focused on is going to school, possibly having to go to work after to contribute to the household income? And so how does this information or this program enhance my day-to-day life? And I think just being able to be that honest about that when it comes to kids is just like, "Yeah, what's in it for me?"

And being able to show with our Peer Mediation program, it's not about just using skills that's going to get you to mediate conflict in a Peer Mediation program, you're going to need different skills and being able to communicate. You're going to have to communicate on the job, as Morgan mentioned before. The law, young people need to understand and be aware of what discrimination is, how to identify it and what to do to address it because our identities can't be left at the door in any space we walk into.

So being able to have those open and honest conversations on this is why this information is important and making the connections to people's day-to-day lives, are the way to build that community, especially in schools where teachers have a lot of things, too, going on, such as teaching to a standardized test and making sure certain lessons are learned in order to meet certain educational requirements. So making sure that we are able to connect in a way where we are enhancing the space and not just being an additive.

Megan Gildin:

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you so much for sharing, and thank you to all of our panelists and speakers for joining us and to all of our participants. We'll close out for today. I think I'm leaving with the big takeaway of centering our collective humanity in all of this. I hope you all have a wonderful rest of your afternoon, and thank you for joining us.